

“No Lost Causes”

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Rom 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

“God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” Romans 11:2

“Measure twice and cut once.” With that short, yet familiar piece of advice, I am sure I have the attention of most of the men in the congregation. At the very least, I have the attention of the carpenters among us. “Measure twice and cut once.” It is advice that we might here an older, wiser, more experienced carpenter give to one of his younger apprentices to help him be more precise in his work and avoid unnecessary mistakes. This advice helps the Bible student as well. When you and I hear, read, or study a passage of Scripture, we want to make sure we have the right understanding of the particular passage according to the broader context of the Bible. So we “measure twice” before arriving at an interpretation by checking our understanding of one passage against another passage that may speak to the same idea or issue. This process also serves as a type of quality control. As Christians and students of God’s Word we give this principle a name. We call it “Scripture interpreting Scripture.”

Using this principle for interpreting the Bible, a difficult passage of Scripture is read in light of a clearer, easier to understand passage of Scripture. When this principle of interpreting the Bible is used correctly the interpreter is left with an interpretation that is not based on his own human understanding or feelings, not on what is culturally acceptable or politically correct, not on the understanding of a Biblical scholar, nor on the understanding of a Pope or a Church leader. When the principle of “Scripture interpreting Scripture” is used properly one’s interpretation of a given passage is more likely to be based on a plain and natural reading of God’s Word rather than man’s word.

I bring to mind this principle of Biblical interpretation called “Scripture interpreting Scripture” because we have a difficult passage on our hands this morning in chapter 11 of Paul’s letter to the Romans. We need the help of at least one other particular passage in Scripture to help us interpret and understand what Paul is trying to say to these Roman Christians. We need to measure twice.

We are at the point in our sermon series entitled “God’s Greater Story” in which we are considering God’s greater people, the Church, his New Israel as the Bible tells us (Romans 9:6b; Galatians 6:16). In chapter 11 of Romans Paul attempts to clear up some confusion regarding the true identity of God’s greater people, the Church, his New Israel.

On the one hand, the Jews, ethnic Israel believe that they are God’s true people since they have received “the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, and the patriarchs” (Romans 9:4). From their lineage, and no other, the Messiah will come. They believe they

are God's privileged people and so will be saved and in a right relationship with God simply because they are ethnic Israel. They believe they have the right pedigree for salvation.

On the other hand, Paul seems to be making a distinction between those who are ethnically Jewish or part of Israel but have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and those, from any nation, who are not ethnically Jewish or part of Israel but trust in the sacrifice of Christ for the full atonement of their sins and transgressions and believe in him as the resurrected Lord, receiving the resurrection life he gives. He seems to be saying that the criteria that determines whether or not you are God's greater people, the Church, the New Israel, depends not on ethnicity but faith in Christ. Only then can you be certain that you are truly a child of God and have the right pedigree. And so it seems that on that basis God has made room for those of all nations to be a part of his greater people. He has made room for you and me! Even those who are ethnically Jewish but actually believe and trust in Christ. This is God's New Israel.

But let us measure a "second time" before cutting? Hear the words of Jesus to the leaders of ethnic Israel:

⁴²Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'? ⁴³Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. ⁴⁴And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him." ⁴⁵When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he was speaking about them" (Matthew 21:42-45).

Jesus makes it clear that because of their rejection of him, the Son of Man, the "cornerstone," the Jewish people, and all who reject Christ, will fall short of being included in the kingdom of God. Even the chief priests and the Pharisees who heard the parable agree that Jesus is speaking about them! As a result of their rejection those from all other nations now have an opportunity to be a part of God's kingdom as his greater people, the Church, his New Israel.

If the Jewish people, Israel, rejected God and his promise in Christ, does this then mean that the Word of God has failed (Romans 9:6a)? Does this mean that God has rejected his people (Romans 11:1)? These are the questions that Paul anticipates. And he answers by pointing first to himself and then to God's remnant. He makes the point that he himself is an Israelite (Romans 11:1), yet also one who has not stumbled over Christ, the cornerstone. On the contrary, he trusts in Christ. Also, Paul points to the words of the Old Testament prophets and the examples of God saving for himself a remnant, a remainder of Jews and ethnic Israelites that have believed God's Word of promise and have faith in Christ. Though people may fail in their rejection of God and his promises, he never fails. He never rejects them. He is always faithful.

So what are we to make of this difficult passage in chapter 11 of Paul's letter to the Romans? What are we to make of the words of Jesus that support Paul's teaching? At least this one reassuring truth: God has not written any one off. There are no "lost causes." He desires all people to receive his

grace and forgiveness of sins in Christ. He desires all people to have eternal, resurrection life in Christ. He desires all people to be joined through the waters of Holy Baptism to his greater story of salvation as his greater people. And though his patience has an end, he is very patient (2 Peter 3:9). His patience has resulted in the certainty of your salvation and mine (2 Peter 3:15). So if there are people with whose salvation and relationship with God we are concerned, we can take comfort in the commitment of God not to write them off but to pursue them by his Spirit at work through his Word and the Sacraments. Yet, this does not discount our role through God's Spirit to be a part of the pursuit (observation made by Dr. William Carr, "Lectionary at Lunch on Romans 11," Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO). In our vocations and through his Spirit God wants to use his Christian husbands, wives, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, neighbors, teachers, grandparents, congregation members, and coworkers to pursue the salvation of those who are not yet his children with a holy pedigree as his *New Israel*. May God give us the courage to participate in his mission to save all people in Christ. Amen.